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Monster of Non-circulating Library Collections Rears Ugly Head ... Again

by **Phil Davis** (Life Science Librarian, Albert R. Mann Library, Cornell University) <pmd8@cornell.edu>

In economically desperate times, the monster of inefficiency rears its ugly head again to show how wasteful we are. This monster attacks collection librarians for purchasing books that are never used. While this argument is popular (even trendy), it is both unfounded and unproductive.

The pinnacle study frequently cited is the famous (or infamous) Pittsburgh study¹ which found that 40% of books and monographs acquired in 1969 never circulated after six years.

While the authors looked at the properties and attributes of those things that circulated, there was no analysis done on those things that did *not* circulate (the so called "zero class"). Follow-up studies in other libraries^{2,3} have determined that many of their non-circulating items were:

- 1) things that *could not* circulate (i.e. reference materials),
- 2) things that the library didn't purchase (i.e. gifts and exchange),
- 3) things that the library receives out of legal requirement (i.e. government depository), or
- 4) things the library purchases because of a comprehensive collection mission.

With these classes removed, the proportion of non-circulating items becomes very low. So in summary, this argument of the non-circulating library collection is empirically unfounded.

But whether the non-circulating figure is 40% or 20% or 10% still leads us to the second part of the question, "why are librarians so wasteful?"

Circulation studies are all historical in nature. What they give us is a statistical and aggregate snapshot of a population of materials that the library has already acquired. Understanding what has circulated in the past, nevertheless, gives us little or no future predictive ability for future purchases.


It is clear that senior administrators and dubious library efficiency consultants that use the Pittsburgh study as an example of library wastefulness have never read this study — they always forget the key argument presented on page 5 in the introduction:

"...it is not particularly useful for a bibliographer to know that 10% of all the titles (s)he selects will satisfy 90% of client demand for materials in a given discipline, unless s(he) can also be told which 10%. It is useless to tell the acquisitions librarian that half the monographs ordered will never be used, unless you are also in a position to say which 50% to avoid buying. The simple fact is that the available data lack sufficient predictive power to enable the librarian to modify selection practices with assurances that the results will be more responsive to future needs of clients."

Tony Ferguson ("Back Talk — Use Statistics," *Against the Grain*, Sept 2002) provides several arguments for why the academic library mission leads to the purchase of books that may not circulate soon after purchase. But even institutions that lack the scholarly mission of the academic library have the same problems. For-profit bookstores return millions of dollars of unsold books every year to publishers that are not sold to their clientele. They face the same uncertainty as libraries, that new authors and new titles will never be purchased and turn a profit.

If libraries only purchased what they knew would circulate, they would fail to serve academia. They would function like a bookstore that only carried the latest titles from the *NY Times*

best sellers list — a reactionary library, and a poor one at that.

Library collections are born from uncertainty and grow with uncertainty. It is through uncertainty that we best serve the needs of academics and support scholarly research. If this is the reason that we are criticized for wasting library funds, let the efficiency consultants eat their words. 




Endnotes

1. Kent, Allen, Jacob Cohen, K. Leon Montgomery, James G. Williams, Stephen Bulick, Roger R. Flynn, William N. Sabor, and Una Mansfield. *Use of Library Materials: The University of Pittsburgh Study*. Vol. 27, *Books in Library and Information Science*. New York: Marcel Dekker, 1979.
2. Blecic, Deborah D. "Monograph Use at an Academic Health Sciences Library: The First Three Years of Shelf Life." *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 88, no. 2 (2000): 145-51.
3. Eldredge, Jonathan D. "The Vital Few Meet the Trivial Many: Unexpected Use Patterns in a Monographs Collection." *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 86, no. 4 (1998): 496-503.

Here Lies The Book, R.I.P.: from page 47

tools will not be available in print formats. This is alarming but not catastrophic. Journals will also go the way of all ion but costs will remain as high as ever.¹²

Books on the other hand will have a different fate, at least for now. There will still be many more obituaries written between now and 100 years from now. But by and large they will be greatly exaggerated. Some will surely argue that we who defend the book defend the wrong thing. Medium is nothing, they will say, only content. And I believe it is just that sort of nonsense that told us soup cans and oddly bent coat-hangers with meta-physical names were art forms. For now, anyway, we will thankfully live yet another generation or two in the "sweet serenity of books." 

Rumors from page 18

ing interview with **Lorin Garson** <l_garson@acs.org> very soon, we hope! Did you know that Bartow's mother lives in Charleston where he was visiting before he went to see his NYC daughter. That **Bartow** sure does get around!

Just heard that the debonair **Craig Flansburg** joined TDNet on January 6. Hurray!

Last but definitely not least, **Ron Chepesiuk** (Winthrop University) <rchelesiuk@compuserve.com> and a long-time contributor to **ATG** has announced that he is gone from Winthrop as of December 31 to embark on a full-time writing and teaching career. Good luck, **Ron**, and we hope to hear a lot more from you! 